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The Kensetts, Pratt Streets and Urban Unrest in two Continents

Dr Ruth Levitt

My research into the 18th and 19th century Kensett family has uncovered some intriguing and little-known connections between streets in London and Baltimore and political dissent in Britain and America in the 18th and 19th centuries.

“The alterations in this parish during the last fifty years are incalculable. Not fifty years ago its rural lanes, hedgeside roads, and lovely fields made it the constant resort of those who, being busily engaged during the day in the bustle of then limited London, sought its quietude and fresh air to re-invigorate their spirits. [...] Little if any part of this great parish is now uncovered with houses; the once quiet country is swallowed up in the over-gorged metropolis; [...] its rusticity is past.”¹

The author of those wistful words in 1870 was looking back at Camden Town before its fields dwindled and it was transformed into a suburb for the ever-growing ranks of London’s artisans and shopkeepers, factory hands, labourers, clerks and domestic servants. When John Robert Kensett (1789-1861) moved there in 1847, the nearby section of the Regent’s Canal had been open for over 25 years, the London and Birmingham Railway’s terminus at Euston Station and its goods yards were ten years old and most of the roads were already laid out. Kensett’s house was

56 Pratt Street, in the first short terrace on the south side, east of Queen Street (Figure 1). The north side of the street was consecrated land, leased since 1805 to the parish of St Martin’s in the Fields for an additional burial ground and small chapel; St Martin’s Almshouses were

added in 1817, fronting Bayham Street to accommodate poor women from that parish. More houses were gradually added in Pratt Street and surrounding streets over the next decades, steadily increasing the density of dwellings, workshops and factories.²



Figure 1. Greenwood’s Map of London, 1827. (Source: © Mark Annand: http://users.bathspa.ac.uk/greenwood/map_a4h.html)

Kensett had spent the first ten years of his working life working on a sugar estate in Jamaica. Then he went to America and, by the early 1820s, was in New York working as a clerk and shopkeeper, where he obtained US naturalization in 1832. He later said:

“...in New York the field is broad and open for the industrious and enterprising spirit – it is an asylum whereto one living under a monarchy with all its oppressions would be glad to flee taking refuge under its protective eaves and feeling their health and invigorating principles spread forth for his protection and encouragement.”³

However, in that same year his stepfather and younger brother had died in Hampton Court village where he had been born, where his bereaved and elderly mother now asked him to return to be with her. Her third son, Thomas Kensett, had already died in 1829 in New York; he had emigrated from England in 1802 and settled in Connecticut near New Haven, married and had five children.

John Robert Kensett stayed in the village from 1835 until his mother died in 1843. He then moved to London, first to Newman Street off Oxford Street in the West End, near to a cousin who was a chair maker, before going the few miles north to 56 Pratt Street, where he lived for his remaining 14 years. His neighbours included several artisans and tradesmen (Table 1).

He kept in touch with his American relations and appointed two nephews to be his executors, brothers Thomas Kensett (see below) and John Frederick Kensett.

Charles Pratt

Kensett's landlord was George Pratt, grandson of Sir Charles Pratt (1714–1794; Figure 2), who had granted the first leases to construct 1,400 houses in 1790 and whose son John Jeffreys Pratt and grandson George continued the development of

Pratt Street		
2	Daniel J Porter	oil and colourman
3	William Lay	fruiterer
4	Robert Collingwood	butcher
9	Thomas Bolton	house decorator
9	George Birmingham	surgeon (Camden Town Dispensary)
10	Camden Estate	Paving Commission branch office
18	William Hodges	grocer
31	Robert Percy	smith and bell hanger
68	John Brown	dairy
71	John George Wickham	grocer
72	Richard Holding	stone mason
76	William Scott	baker
86	William Hart	baker
92	John Wright	paperhanger

Table 1. Tradesmen in Pratt Street, Camden Town, 1852. (Source: Post Office Directory, 1852)

Camden Town. Charles Pratt was a lawyer, son of a Lord Chancellor, and lived with his wife Elizabeth at Camden Place, a manor house in Chislehurst, Kent, named after the historian William Camden (1551–1623) who had lived there intermittently from 1609 to his death. Camden was headmaster at Westminster School before he became Clarenceux King of Arms at the College of Arms. His celebrated history and topographical survey of the British Isles, *Camden's Britannia*, was published in Latin in 1586 and he wrote the first account of the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1617).

Charles Pratt was briefly an MP (1757–61); he resigned when he was appointed Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas from January 1762 and knighted. He was created Baron



Figure 2. Charles Pratt, Lord Camden, 1793. (Source: © National Portrait Gallery <http://www.npg.org.uk>)

Camden of Camden Place in the county of Kent in July 1765 and gave the name Camden Town to the southern part of the rural prebendal manor of Canteloves (Kentish Town), which then had only two buildings: a manor house and an inn. Elizabeth Pratt had inherited the land, via her father, from her grandfather, John Jeffreys, who acquired the lease in 1670. Pratt entered the House of Lords and became Lord Chancellor in 1766 when his friend William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, became prime Minister again (1776–8).

Pratt and Wilkes

In the words of John Robert Kensett's cousin Richard Kensett, the journalist and radical MP John Wilkes (1727–1797) was “...the restorer of the liberty of the press, and of those of the British subject”. Wilkes was also a patriot who thought the Earl of Bute had profoundly betrayed British interests as Prime Minister by conceding unduly generous terms to France and Spain in the Treaty of Paris, which he signed in February 1763, thereby depriving Britain of several Caribbean, North American and Indian territories recently won from them. Bute had started a weekly paper in 1761 called *The Briton* to publicise his own views, edited by the writer Tobias Smollett, and Wilkes had responded by anonymously launching his weekly *North Briton* in June 1762.

On 23 April 1763 in issue 45, Wilkes vigorously criticised the new Prime Minister, George Grenville, for endorsing the treaty terms negotiated by Bute. A week later Wilkes and others were arrested as *North Briton*'s "authors, printers and publishers" under a general warrant and charged with seditious libel.

Wilkes was held in the Tower of London, his house was searched and papers were removed. His friends appealed against his arrest to the Court of Common Pleas, where Chief Justice Pratt ordered his release on grounds of parliamentary privilege. When the next session of parliament opened on 15 November 1763, Wilkes stated his complaint at the way he had been treated, and after a debate the House of Commons deferred its decision on whether to accept Wilkes's privilege regarding the libel action. The next day Wilkes was wounded in the belly by a pistol shot in a duel with Samuel Martin MP, a Treasury minister, who had exchanged insults with Wilkes in letters that day about the *North Briton* affair. On 24 November the House of Commons resolved that Wilkes was not protected by parliamentary privilege regarding the charge of seditious libel, and he was therefore liable to be rearrested; and that *North Briton* issue 45 should be burned in public as a "false, scandalous and seditious libel."⁴

*"The burning of the North Briton at the Royal Exchange was attended with a violent riot, and the sheriff himself (Harley) was obliged to take refuge in the Mansion House. All candid people confessed, that this measure evinced more impotence and malignity than good sense; and as such it was treated by the populace."*⁵

A month later Wilkes left for France and was subsequently joined in Paris by his daughter. Pratt ruled on 6 December 1763 that general warrants were not legally acceptable for searching unspecified buildings, but:

*"...totally subversive of the liberty of the subject...[and]...contrary to the fundamental principles of the constitution..."*⁶

The House of Commons nevertheless expelled Wilkes when it reconvened on 19 January 1764. Just over a month later, and in his absence, Wilkes was tried at the King's Bench court for publishing *North Briton* and *An Essay on Woman*,⁷ and found guilty of libel. He was summonsed several times to appear at court but remained in France, and on 1 November 1764 he was outlawed. He visited England briefly three times in 1766 and 1767 hoping to obtain a pardon, without success, then returned in 1768 and was elected MP for Middlesex that March. On 27 April Wilkes voluntarily handed himself in and was held at King's Bench Prison, Southwark. His outlawry for failing to attend summonses in 1764 was revoked on 8 June and on 14 June 1768 he was sentenced to 22 months imprisonment and a fine of £1,000 for his libel conviction of 1764.

It was during his time as a prisoner that Wilkes encountered Richard Kensett, a market gardener near Guildford and enthusiastic supporter. Kensett learnt that Wilkes would be coming to Guildford on 8 August 1768 to give evidence at the William Allen murder trial at the Surrey Assizes following the St George's Fields Massacre. Soldiers had clashed with the angry crowd at that riot outside the King's Bench Prison, several people were killed and injured, and three soldiers were indicted for murdering Allen, an innocent youth. Kensett delivered a basket of fruit garnished with a laurel branch to Wilkes, with a note:

*"To John Wilkes, Esq. The most distinguished of Englishmen; the restorer of the liberty of the press, and of those of the British subject; this service of fruit is presented and begged the acceptance of, by his most obedient and humble servant, RICHARD KENSETT, Gardener."*⁸

Wilkes wrote to his daughter that evening:

*"...We were received with ringing of bells and general acclamations of the people. I have had a noble present of fruit, of which I have saved the pine apple for my dear girl."*⁹

Pratt Street, Baltimore

Over 20 years before the roads and housing in Camden Town were beginning to be laid out, Charles Pratt's name was already adorning a street 3,600 miles away, in Baltimore, Maryland. Baltimore had been founded in the early 18th century as a trading port for tobacco and sugar, and named after an English politician, George Calvert (1579-1632), who was given the manor of Baltimore in Cork, County Longford in Ireland in 1623 by James I, and ennobled as Baron Baltimore. Calvert obtained the governorship of the colonial Province of Maryland in 1632, which passed to his son Cecil Calvert, the 2nd Lord Baltimore.

The commemoration of Pratt's name in colonial Baltimore was a consequence of his increasing popularity and growing reputation after his judgements in Wilkes's libel case. As Lord Camden and Lord Chancellor Pratt now spoke out against policies and legislation that were inflaming American resistance to British colonial rule. In his maiden speech in the House of Lords on 10 February 1766 he said that parliament had no right to tax the Americans,¹⁰ a stance (shared by William Pitt) that particularly endeared him to the Maryland Assembly, who commended the:

*"...inflexible Integrity, and conspicuous Abilities of those shining Ornaments of their Country, who, uninfluenced by narrow Views, from local Attachments, have, in the genuine Spirit of true Patriots, and faithful Guardians of the Common Weal, extended their Regards to the comprehensive Object of the whole British Empire."*¹¹

In November of that year the Lower House of the Maryland Assembly decided to commission in London a statue of Pitt and a portrait of Pratt, to place in the Provincial Court at Annapolis. They voted \$2,250 for this "Act of Gratitude" but the Upper House withheld its agreement in December although it concurred with the sentiment; it objected to the Lower House assuming exclusive power to vote public money, and the bill lapsed. Pratt Street was named around that time: the location was surveyed in 1766 and the name was probably authorised by Baltimore Town Commissioners. Initially Pratt Street terminated at the west side of the Basin (Figure 3). As land was reclaimed to build more wharves at the water's edge, Pratt Street extended east to become a continuous main thoroughfare crossing downtown Baltimore, as it is to this day (Figure 4).

Baltimore's economy prospered and in the 19th century it also became the main marketplace for trade in Chesapeake Bay oysters, and Maryland fruit and vegetables. In 1851, Thomas Kensett (nephew of John Robert) aged 37 moved there from New York with his wife and four

young children. He opened a canning factory at 122 West Falls Avenue and over the next 30 years helped to make Baltimore the leading American centre for food canning. Baltimore's industries as well as its location between the northern and southern states, 200 miles from New York and 40 miles from Washington DC, were reflected in its stance on slavery and its political allegiance during the Civil War, and embroiled it in the conflict from the outset. It did not leave the Union to join the Confederacy although it was a pro-slavery state and many of its population were fervently sympathetic to secession.

On 12 April 1861 fighting began when Confederate forces attacked the Union's Fort Sumter near Charleston. President Lincoln ordered Union troops to come from Massachusetts and Pennsylvania to reinforce the defence of the government capital at Washington. The fastest way to move the hundreds of men was by trains through Baltimore. The first 600 Pennsylvanian soldiers arrived from Harrisburg at the North Central Railroad's Bolton Depot in northern Baltimore on Thursday 18th April, where they were "...jostled and

pushed about considerably..." by a crowd several hundred strong. The crowd jeered and hissed at them and they were "...subjected to numerous indignities"¹² as they marched to the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad's Mount Clare Station on the west of Baltimore to board a train to Washington.

The following day, Friday 19 April, a much larger group of men arrived in 35 railroad cars at the President Street Station of the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore (PWR) Railroad on the east side of Baltimore (block lower right in Figure 4), close to Thomas Kensett's canning factory in West Falls Avenue. These 700 armed soldiers of the 6th Massachusetts Regiment and 1,000 unarmed Pennsylvania volunteers had to transfer to the Camden Station of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (shaded, on the left in Figure 4), one and a half miles west along Pratt Street, for the railroad to Washington was by the PWR station.

Transferring the troops between these two stations meant detaching the cars from the locomotive, pulling them by one by one with horse teams along the railtrack in Pratt Street (marked in Figure 4) and attaching them to a new locomotive at Camden Street to complete the journey south to the capital. This did not go according to plan, as the *Baltimore Sun's* terse front page headlines reported on the Saturday morning:

*"Transit of Massachusetts Volunteers and other troops through Baltimore. Their passage is interrupted. Railroad track barricaded. Passage of several cars. Citizens of Baltimore shot down in our streets. Massachusetts Volunteers killed and wounded. Immense rally of citizens on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. The soldiers stopped. Calling out of City military. The railroads decline to pass any more Northern troops. Scenes and incidents, &c. Meeting in Monument Square."*¹³



Figure 3. Baltimore Town in 1773. (Source: *Baltimore American*, 20 Aug 1873 <http://old.library.jhu.edu/collections/specialcollections/rarebooks/peabody/Maps/balt1752/bmore1773.jpg>)

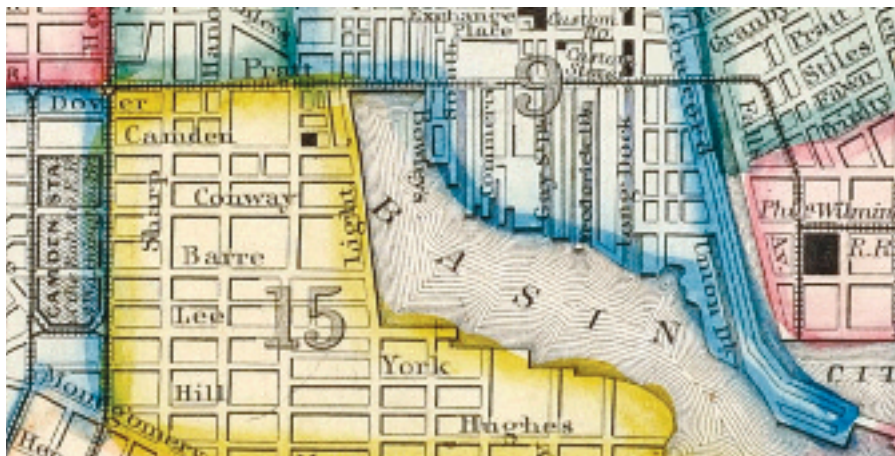


Figure 4. Baltimore, 1860 (detail). (Source: S. Augustus Mitchell, *New General Atlas*, 1861. <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/bitstream/handle/1774.2/32596/Plan%20of%20Baltimore%201860.jpg?sequence=1>.)


Mr WJ Stowell, the PWR station master, saw the riot with his own eyes and concluded that the police had wilfully failed to stop it.¹⁴ Six of the cars with Massachusetts men got through, the rest were impeded by the crowd throwing stones and ripping up paving stones to block the track; shots were fired. The crowd then turned its attention to the President Street Station, attacking the railroad cars and badly injuring several of the volunteers.¹⁵ Four Massachusetts soldiers and twelve civilians died, thirty six people were wounded before the Pennsylvanians eventually escaped for home in another train.

That night Baltimore's Mayor, George William Brown, wrote to Lincoln:

*"...The people are exasperated to the highest degree by the passage of troops, and the citizens are universally decided in the opinion that no more should be ordered to come."*¹⁶

Secessionists also burned railway bridges around Baltimore to hinder further troop movements. Lincoln responded by imposing martial law on Baltimore and parts of Maryland in May and suspending the right to habeas corpus there. Baltimore's Police Marshall and commissioners were arrested in June, in September Mayor Brown was arrested along

with a newspaper editor and some outspoken Maryland congressmen, and a Federal Grand Jury was appointed to investigate the Pratt Street riot and its aftermath. It was September 1861 before Thomas Kensett could leave Baltimore to go to the other Pratt Street to deal with his late uncle's affairs.

A century later London's Pratt Street was transformed again, when the houses, shops, workshops and yards on that side of the street were pulled down and cleared, as was the whole cluster of buildings and streets bordered by Bayham and Camden Streets down to King Street (renamed Plender in the 1930s) in 1968 to make way for twelve new blocks of council flats. 

Notes

- 1 Samuel Palmer, *St Pancras; being antiquarian, topographical, and biographical memoranda...*, London, 1870, pp 17-18.
- 2 Camden History Society, *Streets of Camden Town*, London, 2003, pp 32-3.
- 3 John Frederick Kensett, letter to his mother, 20 June 1840.
- 4 J Almon, *The correspondence of the late John Wilkes with his friends*, printed from the original manuscripts in which are introduced memoirs of his life by J Almon, 5 vols, London, Richard Phillips, 1805, vol 2, p 4.
- 5 *ibid.*, p 8.

- 6 'Wilkes v. Wood', in *A complete collection of state trials and proceedings for high treason and other crimes and misdemeanours...*, (ed. TB Howell), London, Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, vol 19, 1816, col 1167.
- 7 A privately printed obscene parody of Alexander Pope's *An essay on Man* (1732-4), which Wilkes co-authored in 1754.
- 8 J Wilkes, *English liberty; or the British lion roused; containing the sufferings of John Wilkes Esq; from the first of his persecution down to the present time*, London, 2 vols, 1769, vol 1, p 372.
- 9 J Almon, *op.cit.*, vol 3, pp 280-281.
- 10 J Campbell, *The lives of the Lord Chancellors and Keepers of the Great Seal of England, from the earliest times till the reign of King George IV*, London, J Murray, 8 vols, 1848-69, vol 5, p 254.
- 11 Province of Maryland, *Proceedings and Acts of the General Assembly, 1766-1768*, *Lower House Journal*, 53, 26 November 1766, p 188. [With thanks to Christine Anderson, Academic Liaison Librarian of Senate House Library, University of London, for assistance in locating this source.]
- 12 TJ Scharf, *The chronicles of Baltimore*, Baltimore, Turnbull Bros, 1874, p 588.
- 13 *Baltimore Sun*, 20 April 1861, p 1.
- 14 Testimony before Federal Grand Jury, Baltimore, 18 September 1861, JW White (ed), 'Forty seven eye witness accounts of the Pratt Street riot and its aftermath', *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 106/1 (Spring 2011), p 84.
- 15 Scharf, p 593.
- 16 *ibid.*, p 595.

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